

BOOK REVIEWS

Leslie M. Alexander. *Fear of a Black Republic: Haiti and the Birth of Black Internationalism in the United States*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2023. Pp. 340. Paper \$23.80.

In *Fear of a Black Republic*, Leslie M. Alexander, the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Professor of History at Rutgers University, contributes to the “Haitian Turn” in recent historical scholarship. Coined by Professor Celucien Joseph, the “Haitian Turn” describes an increasing awareness by scholars of Haiti’s influence in the rise of Black internationalism and the worldwide struggle of the African diaspora for justice, freedom, and equality. This study succeeds in centering Haiti within this larger conversation about Black internationalism by arguing that Haiti’s ascendancy during the nineteenth century inspired Black leaders, free and enslaved, across the African diaspora, and especially in the United States, in their struggles for liberation. Specifically, explaining how Black activists and the enslaved incorporated the tools of vindication, emigration, rebellion, and advocacy in their fight for justice.

The work is organized chronologically over eight chapters. This ensures that it never loses the narrative thread, following many of the same Black activists through time while also providing valuable historical context for Haitian history in the nineteenth century. Here, Alexander truly adds her research and voice to scholars like Chelsea Stieber, Julia Gaffield, Laurent Dubois, and Celucien Joseph by illuminating an oft-overlooked period in Haitian history. *Fear of a Black Republic* answers the call of Professor Ronald Angelo Johnson for more monographs dedicated to the shared history of the early American Republic and Haiti. It goes beyond the Haitian Revolution to tell the history of Haiti during the nineteenth century.

The sources used in this study are diverse and include letters, speeches, magazines, and songs, though newspapers are the most abundant resource. A letter from a Black Philadelphian emigre to Haiti describing the welcome he received in Port au Prince is a compelling attempt at incorporating voices of activists outside of the leadership. Alexander also attempts to uncover how

the enslaved in America felt about Haiti, in one instance, by analyzing a song sung at different periods by both free and enslaved Black Americans. Her attempts land with varying degrees of success. The uneven results speak more to the difficulty in uncovering enslaved voices than it does to Alexander's, or the book's, overall veracity.

If this piece has one shortcoming, it may be in the lack of serious analysis of Haitian failures of state, electing instead to blame isolation and manipulation by Europe and the U.S. for nearly every problem Haiti faced. In 1990, Michel-Rolph Trouillot in *Haiti: State Against Nation* provided the neo-colonial context for Haiti in the nineteenth century while never letting Haiti's leaders off the hook for their failures. *Fear of a Black Republic*, too often neglects any critical analysis of the Haitian state during this period. One specific example comes in chapter five, in which Alexander argues that even in the face of a *complex reality* in Haiti, Black activists continued to champion the Republic's sovereignty and push at times for emigration. Alexander never tries to explain this reality which involved rampant state corruption and the fleecing of the peasantry through indirect taxation. This argument is important and would be powerful if taken to its logical conclusion: that a certain amount of fetishization occurred on the part of Black leaders in the U.S. towards Haiti. At times, Alexander remarks on the overly romanticized views of Haiti held by Black activists, but the book never goes further. And it never contends with the dissonance between Haitian leaders and the Haitian citizenry.

As it stands, *Fear of a Black Republic* is a praiseworthy addition to the ever-evolving study of Haitian and early American history. It will be of interest to an academic audience, especially aspiring Caribbean historians. Significantly, this study advances the work of recent scholars by illuminating even more, the connections between Haiti, the early American republic, and Black internationalism. Alexander dedicates herself to using Black voices, free, enslaved, American, and Haitian, to undo a historical silencing of an important and, unfortunately, all too relevant period in Haitian and American history.

Peter Wassell